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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the extent to which Asian undergraduate students of English as a second language (ESL) in American institutions had more learning difficulty than non-Asian students, and the relationship of length of time in the United States to the degree of this difficulty. Subjects were 20 randomly-selected ESL undergraduate students at one university, 10 Asian and 10 non-Asian. Data were drawn from a survey eliciting students' demographic data and perceptions of their classroom learning difficulty. Results indicate that the Asian students did feel more difficulty than non-Asian students felt, but found no association between length of stay and degree of perceived difficulty. Suggestions for further research are offered. The student questionnaire and a chart of results are appended. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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ESL Undergraduate Students' Perceived Difficulties in American Classrooms

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The purpose of this study was to investigate whether Oriental ESL undergraduate students were more likely than non-Oriental ESL undergraduate students to perceive difficulties in American classrooms. This was rather a mini-research but the results were interesting from the cross-cultural perspectives. Implications were discussed particularly in terms of educational technology for the ESL undergraduate students to supplement their mainstream courses.

English as a second language (ESL) is a relatively recent academic field (Benesch, 1991), yet the importance of this field is rapidly increasing. The 457,984 foreign students who enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities in 1996-1997 represented a record, up 0.9% from the previous year's record ("Foreign Enrollment Rises," 1997). American universities have a reputation for delivering quality education, and English is recognized as a global language anyway (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1990). In general, American higher education is characterized by speed and competition in classwork. With a different set of both language and literacy experiences, however, all the ESL students may not perceive the same degree of difficulties in taking college or university courses in the United States. Oriental and Arabic university students' reading abilities, for instance, are significantly lower than those of Hispanic college students (Spencer & Sadoski, 1988).

The study reported here was designed, in particular, to investigate whether Oriental ESL undergraduate students were more likely than non-Oriental ESL undergraduate students to perceive difficulties in American classrooms. Based on the assumption that the longer ESL students would stay in the United States, the less they would perceive difficulties in taking courses, this study was further designed to investigate the relationship between the length of ESL students' stay in the United States and the degree of their perceived difficulties in the course work.

Review of the Literature

Although published results of comparative studies on Oriental ESL versus non-Oriental ESL students were not found in a computerized search (using the ERIC database), several comparative studies on ESL versus EPL (English as a primary language) students indicated that there were significant differences between ESL and EPL students. According to Banks (1981), ESL students perceive great difficulties in mainstream curriculums compared to EPL students primarily due to ESL students' language and cultural backgrounds. Culture is indeed an important but often neglected variable in the second language learning. Cultural differences among ESL students may result in the different perceived degree of difficulties in taking American university courses. Holmes and Moulton's (1994) study on writing process in multicultural settings has revealed that there are significant differences in the manner in which students from different cultures process information.

ESL university students tend to score higher on open-ended accounting questions, whereas ESL students tend to score higher on multiple-choice accounting questions (Jenkins & Holley, 1990). In Asia, a greater emphasis has been placed on memorization rather than discussion in the course work (Schieffelin & Gilmore, 1986). In Japan, for example, university students are not expected to think critically or to question ideas but are expected to memorize facts or figures (Kitamura, cited in Bess, 1997). Blanche's (1992) study on the cross-cultural education in twenty-one European countries has revealed that the significant differences in learning of university students that are attributed to culture and social structures. A comparative study (American versus Japanese students) by Kobayashi (1992) has found that primarily due to cultural differences, students learn differently and professors evaluate differently the quality of the classwork done by those students.

Thus prior studies have established that the differences between EPL and ESL

university students are significant in such variables as reading comprehension, writing assignment, note-taking, and test-taking. The differences are not only attributed to English as a second language of ESL students, but they are also attributed to ESL students' cultural and social differences. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to compare the two groups of ESL undergraduate students who had different ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as different language experiences.

Method

Survey Participants

A survey questionnaire was used as a testing instrument. Participants were 20 ESL undergraduate students at the University of Memphis. Although all the 558 international students at the University were from 57 different countries, more than 80% of them were from Asia, mostly India, China, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Thailand; and only approximately 25% were in undergraduate programs. The population of interest was confined to all the 140 ESL undergraduate students. The participants (10 Orientals and 10 non-Orientals) were randomly selected from an alphabetical listing of the ESL undergraduate students in the International Students Advisor's Office. Students from India were considered as non-Orientals in this study because they largely differ in their social and cultural backgrounds from students from east Asia who were considered as Orientals. Table 1 presents the sample students' origin countries and the number of the students from each country.

Research Hypotheses

Two hypotheses were established in this study. Hypothesis 1: Oriental ESL undergraduate students would perceive more difficulties in American classrooms than would non-Oriental ESL undergraduate students. Hypothesis 2: There would be an association between the length of ESL undergraduate students' stay in the United States and the degree of their perceived difficulties in American classrooms.

Table 1
Origin Countries of Sample Students

Oriental Group		Non-Oriental Group	
Country	Number	Country	Number
China	3	Argentina	1
Hong Kong	1	Brazil	1
Korea	1	Denmark	1
Malaysia	2	India	3
Taiwan	1	Iran	1
Thailand	1	Germany	1
Vietnam	1	Russia	1
		Venezuela	1
Total	10	Total	10

Data Analysis

The data collected from 20 undergraduate students, who answered the international students questionnaire (see Appendix A), were used in the following statistical tests. First, independent (one-tailed) *t* test was used to determine the mean differences of the random samples between Oriental and non-Oriental students (Hypothesis 1). Then, correlation and regression analyses were used to determine the relationship between the length of stay in America and the degree of difficulty in the course work (Hypothesis 2). Although it was difficult to tightly control the questionnaire in such a small scale research, consistency was maintained in collecting the data to assure the reliability of the instrument. Nevertheless, this sample may not be representative of the entire population. Thus the results reported here in this paper are unique for this sample of undergraduate students.

Results

The participants responded on a 4-point Likert-typed scale: 4 = extremely difficult, 3 = very difficult, 2 = somewhat difficult, and 1 = not difficult at all (for the detailed

survey results, see Appendix B). At the significance level of .05, as summarized in Table 2, *t* test indicated that Oriental ESL undergraduate students (M = 2.300) significantly perceived more difficulties than non-Oriental ESL undergraduate students (M = 1.600). Accordingly, the hypothesis 1 was accepted. This result can be viewed as an indication for possible differences between Oriental and non-Oriental undergraduate students.

Table 2
Perceived Difficulties Between Two Groups

	Oriental Group	Non-Oriental Group
Sample size (*N*)	10	10
Mean (M)	2.300*	1.600*
Standard deviation (SD)	.675	.843
Standard error (SE)	.213	.267

*$P < .05$ ($P = .0275$ in one-tailed *t* test).

Based on the low Multiple R (.1384), low R-square (.0191), small Slope (.0714), and large Sig T (.5605), there is a clear indication of an extremely weak association between the dependent and the independent variables at the significance level of .05 (see Table 3). In other words, the association between perceived difficulties (dependent variable) in American classrooms and the length of staying in the United States (independent variable) was not detected. This result strongly suggests that the length of stay in the United Sates is not a good variable to use as a predictor of perceived difficulties in American classrooms. In addition, this result may contradict a common sense approach; that is, scientific investigation can sometimes come up with results that contradict the common sense.

Table 3
The Association Between the Length of Stay and the Degree of Difficulty

Multiple R	.13843
R-square	.01016
Slope	.071425
Intercept	1.814684
T	.598
Sig T	.5605
Regression line	y = .0714x + 1.8147

Implications

The first issue of this study was to conduct an exploratory investigation regarding perceived difficulties in American classrooms by two groups (Orientals and non-Orientals). The result indicates that Oriental ESL undergraduate students perceive more difficulties than do non-Oriental ESL undergraduate students. The strong confidence level (p = .0275) does suggest that it definitely deserves further investigation. Most American universities treat all the ESL students as *one* entity, assuming that all international students are the same. This study, even though done with a small sample size, points out the possibility that ESL students greatly differ with respect to their educational need and support in taking courses.

If a remedial work is necessary, Oriental students need different than do other foreign students. In the remedial work, the following two concerns are important: (1) what are the characteristics of different ethnic groups? (This concern requires a large scale experimentation in multiple sites). And (2) what are possible educational implications for the findings of the experimentation? These concerns are indeed complex because of the need to develop testing instruments in order to diagnose the need of different ESL students for designing appropriate educational programs. One

of the interesting approaches could be the development of intelligent computer-assisted instructions (I-CAI) especially designed for ESL undergraduate students to supplement their mainstream courses. The use of instructional technology will be most appropriate, mainly because the number of ESL students of each distinct culture may be too small to economically justify more traditional remedial programs in many colleges and universities in the United States.

The second investigation was the relationship between the length of stay in the United States and the degree of perceived difficulties in taking university courses. This is definitely needed to identify the magnitude and the seriousness of the difficulties as well as possible remedies. Statistical analyses of this study indicate the lack of the association between these two variables (the length of stay and the degree of difficulty). If studies with a larger sample size confirm the same result, then research questions should be raised as to what are the factors which determine the perceived difficulties? Are they cultural, social, or language factors? Are they personality, age, or gender differences? In a sense, the results of this study are very interesting when they are used as the preliminary findings of a large scale study. There is a fertile field for research to be done after all.

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Appendix A

International Students Questionnaire

Dear International Students:

It would be greatly appreciated if you would spend a few minutes to respond to this survey. Thank you very much for your cooperation!

1. Is English your second or foreign language? Yes_____ No _____

2. What degree of difficulties do you perceive in taking mainstream courses in this university, primarily due to the fact that English is your second or foreign language? (Mark only one)

Extremely difficult	Very difficult	Somewhat difficult	Not difficult at all

3. How many years have you been in the United States?

   Years _____ Months _____

4. Your native language: _____

5. Your native country: _____

Appendix B

SURVEY RESULTS

	4-point scale	Years in America	Country
Oriental Group (n = 10):			
Student 1	1 (not difficult at all)	1 year and 5 months	China
Student 2	2 (somewhat difficult)	4 years	Vietnam
Student 3	2 (somewhat difficult)	2 years and 10 months	Hong Kong
Student 4	3 (very difficult)	8 months	Thailand
Student 5	2 (somewhat difficult)	1 year and 2 months	Korea
Student 6	2 (somewhat difficult)	1 year	Malaysia
Student 7	3 (very difficult)	2 years	Malaysia
Student 8	3 (very difficult)	1 year	China
Student 9	3 (very difficult)	9 months	Taiwan
Student 10	2 (somewhat difficult)	1 year and 10 months	China
Non-Oriental Group (n = 10):			
Student 1	1 (not difficult at all)	6 years	Brazil
Student 2	2 (somewhat difficult)	2 years	Russia
Student 3	1 (not difficult at all)	1 year	Germany
Student 4	1 (not difficult at all)	1 month	India
Student 5	3 (very difficult)	5 years	India
Student 6	1 (not difficult at all)	1 year	Denmark
Student 7	1 (not difficult at all)	1 year	India
Student 8	3 (very difficult)	3 years and 6 months	Venezuela
Student 9	2 (somewhat difficult)	4 months	Argentina
Student 10	1 (not difficult at all)	1 month	Iran